



Exploring August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* with reference to the Theatre of Absurd

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Received: 2019-02-10

Accepted: 2019-03-20

Published online: 2019-04-20

Abstract

This article is an attempt to examine August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* in view of the Theatre of Absurd. The Play being an exquisite commentary on the meaninglessness of human life will be analyzed with thorough textual evidences. The study will also focus on how the playwright has succeeded in his use of Vedic mythology to dramatize the strife of modern life through a series of different major and minor characters. The attempt will also be made to expound the use of waiting as a strong motif to show the nothingness of man's life. Besides, the playwright's worthwhile clue towards the capitalist world-order driving people towards absolute wretchedness will also be highlighted.

Keywords: Absurdism, Pessimism, Capitalism, Waiting, Suffering, Meaninglessness.

What shall I do to this absurdity –
O heart, o troubled heart – this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail? (Yeats, *Collected* 194)

Introduction

The term "Theatre of Absurd" was coined by Martin Esslin (1918-2002), the Hungarian born British dramatist and critic, in his essay, "The Theatre of Absurd" published in 1962. The genre applies, "to a grouping of the plays that share certain ideas and styles tied together by a common philosophical thread..." (Cohen 261) This thread pertains to the meaningless, absurdity or nothingness of the human life. The notion of this meaninglessness of life got stimulated from the atrophying experience, primarily of the World War I and subsequently, World War II which took millions of human lives and shattered the hopes tied with the modern vis-à-vis the scientific era.

The Theatre of Absurd, thus, is a Post-World War II designation for certain plays belonging to the absurdist realms written by a series of European playwrights in the late 1950's. The theory of the absurd, as such, was formulated, even before the term was coined, by the French essayist and playwright Albert Camus (1913-1960) in his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942). The essay is thoroughly philosophical divided into four chapters:

- a) An Absurd Reasoning
- b) The Absurd Man
- c) Absurd Creation
- d) The Myth of Sisyphus

It is in the fourth chapter Camus delineates the myth of the Corinthian King Sisyphus. Sisyphus, according to the myth, having defied the gods puts Death in manacles so that no human would die. But his efforts turn in vain as the death in due course gets liberated and as Sisyphus's own time of death approaches, he manages to escape. But, eventually, when he is captured again, the gods decide that he should be given an eternal punishment. He would have to push a rock up to the mountain which upon reaching the top would come down leaving Sisyphus to start the same futile task again. Camus views Sisyphus as a defiant hero living life to the fullest, trying to evade death but, eventually gets convicted to a meaningless task.

Camus provides Sisyphus's ceaseless and meaningless toil as a metaphor for modern man who spends time in futile exercises. He sees the modern individual occupied in the same fashion in an outwardly futile task i.e. the absurdity of searching for some meaning or purpose or order inhuman life. The philosophy which Camus presents in this long philosophical essay, ever since, has remained foundational to the entire genre of The Theatre of Absurd. The plays which constitute the Theatre of the Absurd, as can be safely argued, are obsessed with the futility of all action and the pointlessness of all direction. Writing about the features of the absurdist plays, Robert Cohen in his seminal book on the art of drama titled, *Theatre (2003)* remarks that, "going beyond the use of symbols and the fantasy and poetry of other non-realistic, the absurdist have distinguished themselves by employing in their dramas, for example the clocks that clang incessantly, characters that eat pap in ashcans, corpses that grow by the minute, and personal interactions that are belligerently noncredible." (Cohen 261-262) Some of the foundational figures with reference to the Theatre of Absurd, pertinent to make mention of, include:

- I) Jean Genet (French)
- II) Eugene Ionesco (Romanian)
- III) Arthur Adamov (Russian)
- IV) Harold Pinter (English)
- V) Edward Albee (American)

VI) Fermendo Arrabal (Spanish)

The unquestionable leader of the absurdist writers, however, is Irish Samuel Beckett for his path-breaking play *Waiting for Godot* (1955)

August Strindberg (1849-1912) was a prolific twentieth century Swedish litterateur who is considered to be one of the progenitors of the modern European drama. The modern theatre owes a lot to him as he has overwhelmingly impacted it with his dynamic and multifaceted caliber towards the genre of theatre itself. He is hailed as a naturalist, symbolist, expressionist and as an absurdist playwright. His influence is vividly seen on the greats like Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Sean O' Casey, Harold Pinter and especially his greatest disciple in America, Eugene O' Neil. Eugene O' Neil pays him a rich tribute while dubbing him in his essay titled, "Strindberg and Our Theatre" (1923) as, "the most modern of moderns, the greatest interpreter in the theatre of the characteristic spiritual conflicts which constitute the drama – the blood! – of our lives today." (O' Neil, Strindberg) One of his biographers, the Swedish writer and critic Ol of Lagercrantz (1911-2002) in his book *August Strindberg* (1984) extols him for his acumen by pointing towards the fact that Strindberg had an "extraordinary talent for making us believe what he wants us to believe". (qtd. in "August Strindberg: The Perversity of Genius") Thus, owing to his dynamic literary stature he endorses a kind of an, "unwillingness to accept any characterization of his person." (Ibrahim 118) He was an artist par excellence. Given his merit as a phenomenal modernist litterateur, he has attained poise between both the form and the content. His motif is best fitted in his personal life which he has given a vent in a number of autobiographical novels. Besides, his plays also bear a semi-autobiographical touch. Right from his childhood he had been afflicted by emotional and psychological breakdown owing to the early bankruptcy of his father which had led their family into financial crunch. Besides, the most predominant factor which impacted Strindberg as a dramatist was his dissolution of three consecutive marriages which also led him into a misogynist, an antifeminist. Moreover, during the last decade of the 19th century he spent a significant time abroad and got engaged in scientific experiments and studies of the occult which augmented his neurosis and finally led him to hospitalization between the years 1894-1896. The consequences were so intense that Strindberg used to imagine, "witches attempting to murder him." After recovering from his mental crisis, Strindberg returned to Sweden and at the height of his troubles with both censors and women wrote *Inferno*, an autobiographical novel written in French in 1898, translated into English in 1912. The novel deals with Strindberg's life both in Paris and its aftermath depicting his various obsessions, including alchemy and occultism, and showing signs of paranoia and neuroticism. An apt example of neuroticism or the mental breakdown which impacted Strindberg in terms of his work is the play *A Dream Play* published in 1902 and first performed in 1907 in Stockholm, Sweden. Strindberg wrote the play in the midst of his mental breakdown, hence dubbing the play as, "the child of my greatest pain".

The play delineates into the fact that modern world has virtually turned into a nightmare whereby nothing seems in-line with bliss, comfort, harmony rather everything is full of despair. The play with a series of around 40 characters with special emphasis on the three predominant characters like The Officer, The Lawyer and The Poet shows human life tied with suffering, agony and meaninglessness. Almost all the characters are shown miserable in one way or the other. Some characters wait to get liberated from their predicament and the torturing experiences of their respective lives, but their wait itself turns to be a futile course and no worthwhile development occurs in their lives. Thus, they live their lives meaninglessly pertaining to the sheer absurdist order. Therefore, one can safely discern that the central motif of the play is the meaninglessness of life, hence, can be evaluated within the perspective of the theatre of absurd. The play is based mainly on Agnes, the daughter of the Vedic god Indra who sends his daughter to descend on earth and live among the humans in order to experience their life with all its complexities. He assigns her the job to examine the humans, whose mother tongue is complaint i.e. they always complain, if their complaints are justified:

The Voice: I fear me not – for even their mother tongue is named complaint. A race most hard to please, and thankless, are the dwellers on the earth...Descend, that you may see and hear, and then return and let me know if their complaints and wailings have some reasonable ground. (Strindberg and Bjorkman 27)

The Daughter incarnated as a beautiful and mature girl starts her earthly experience by tying wedlock with a poor lawyer. Right from the beginning she experiences terrible human misery through every other character. In other words she feels the trauma and agony of the people at high, amplifying every other day, not even cluing towards betterment which constantly makes her realize that "men are to be pitied". She even prays to god to consider their pathetic state of humans and let them get rid of their misery, "Everlasting One, hear them! Life is evil! Men are to be pitied!" (Strindberg and Bjorkman 67) As a result, one can discern that the play does not only present earthy characters, but also the celestial entities like the daughter of Vedic god Indira to represent the unconditional suffering of man. In fact, the whole play delineates the idea that the goddess descends to witness man's agonizing state of affairs, as Raymond Williams (1921-1988), the Welsh novelist and a Marxist critic in his book *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1971), remarks that the play "is based on the familiar idea of the goddess who descends to earth to discover the truth about the suffering of mankind." (95)

The play is considered a semi-autobiographical play as through the troubled married life of its chief characters The Daughter and The Lawyer it represents Strindberg's own troubled married life with his third wife Harriet Bosse. Besides, the perpetual waiting of The Officer for his beloved Victoria also bears resemblance with

Strindberg's own waiting in his real life for his first wife, Siri Von Essen, the Swedish speaking Finnish actress in the theatre corridors. The third autobiographical element is the Poet's meditation on the absurdity of life which is a representation of Strindberg's own "meditation on the vanity of human existence..." (Balzamo, *Changing Critical* 58) Thus, along with *The Lawyer* and *The Officer*, The Poet is also an incarnation of the Playwright. Moreover, all the tortured figures represented by the characters are real images of the collective human life as they reflect on the modern life with all its atrophy, ennui and wretchedness. The consistent suffering, miseries and agonies shown in the play create an aura whereby the reader visualizes that this life is full of meaninglessness.

Exploring a *Dream Play*

What makes the play an exquisite artistic piece of absurdist theatre, though written decades before the genre came to the forefront in the second half of twentieth century, is that it does focus on the nothingness or meaninglessness of life. The play emphasizes the subject of humans being caught in perpetual suffering. The fact gets substantiated through a series of around forty characters seen vividly experiencing the atrophied circumstances all around. The play can be examined within the perspective of the Absurdist Theatre through the following motifs and characters:

Waiting as a Motif

Strindberg does employ waiting as a motif in this play as many a character are seen waiting for someone to come and liberate them from their untoward situation. Strindberg successfully depicts the meaninglessness of life while reflecting on the pathetic conditions of humans. He portrays a lot of characters doing nothing to work on their problems and come out of their dilemmas, but resorting to meaningless waiting. This waiting as a motif can be expatiated with the characters like, *The Officer*, *The Pensioner*, *The Billposter* and *The Portress* (the doorkeeper), besides waiting lies at the centre of the play as people wait anxiously for the door of the passage way to get opened and to see what lies behind that, the mystery which only gets unraveled towards the end of the play. The study will try to analyze each of these characters separately as follows:

Officer's Waiting

The reader comes across *The Officer* in the very first scene after the prologue and comes to know that he is one among the many characters tormented by the miseries of their life. He is seen waiting for his beloved named Victoria with whom he can renew his blissful relationship and get relieved from his perpetual suffering. He might be feeling that she can turn out to be a cause of happiness around him, thus, he resorts to endless waiting, but, his efforts turn out to be futile as she never turns up:

The Officer: No, I know one woman only, Victoria. Seven years I have come here to wait for her – at noon, when the sun touched the chimneys, and at night, when it was growing dark...Seven years I have been coming here. Seven times three hundred and sixty-five makes two thousand five hundred and fifty-five. (Strindberg and Bjorkman 36-37)

Apart from his constant waiting The Lawyer is always seen complaining as he believes that the life has wronged him appallingly. He complains to Agnes even for his occupation of a groom, i.e. to look after the horses in a stable. He feels utter humiliation with this kind of a job:

The Daughter: What do you see in me?

The Officer: Beauty, which is the harmony of the universe – There are lines of your body which are where to be found, except in the orbits of the solar system, in strings that are singing softly, or in the vibrations of light – You are a child of heaven –

The Daughter: So are you.

The Officer: Why must I then keep horses, tend stable, and cart straw? (Strindberg and Bjorkman 31)

The Officer keeps on complaining and thinking that life has wronged him and treated unjustly. His mother tries to console him for getting an unjust treatment once, when he had been punished for stealing a penny which later was found mere an allegation. This allegation, as he believes was a turning point in his life as it was the moment when suffering started to knock him unstopably:

The Mother: Don't go around feeling that life has wronged you.

The Officer: But when I am treated unjustly –

The Mother: You are thinking of the time when you were unjustly punished for having taken a penny that later turned up?

The Officer: Yes, and that one wrong gave a false twist to my whole life – (Strindberg and Bjorkman 33)

The Portress's Waiting

In the same vein of The Officer another character who resorts to waiting for a beloved is The Portress. She suffers due to her futile wait for thirty years waiting for her lover but like The Officer's Victoria he never showed up. Her lover's escape also impacted her profession of ballet dancing, as remarked by The Billposter:

The Daughter: And your lover never came back?

The Portress: No, but it was not his fault. He had to go - poor thing! That was thirty years ago now.

The Daughter: [To the Billposter] She belonged to the ballet? Up there in the opera-house?

The Billposter: She was number one-but when he went, it was as if her dancing had one with him-and so she didn't get any more parts. (Strindberg and Bjorkman 35)

The Pensioner's Waiting

Another character which can be examined with reference to the motif of waiting is The Pensioner. The reader gets to know him through the perspective of The Officer. The pensioner has retired at an early age of fifty-four, and according to The Officer, is waiting for his death. The Officer believes that, "he may spend twenty-five more years waiting for meals and newspapers – is it not dreadful?" (Strindberg and Bjorkman66) Thus, being a Pensioner he is resorted to a meaningless existence, to do nothing worthwhile except waiting.

The Billposter's Waiting

Strindberg also illustrates the character of The Billposter in-line with waiting as a motif. He is seen in suffering as he does not get his aspirations fulfilled. He waits ceaselessly to put his hands on the green color dipnet. Though, he gets one but that does not come up with his expectations and he does not like that much, as he remarks, "...the net turned out pretty good, but not as I had expected...the pleasure of it was not so much after all." (Strindberg and Bjorkman41)

Therefore, The Officer, The Portress, The Pensioner and The Billposter all belong to the same realm in terms of resorting to waiting and doing nothing or doing quite little. This waiting is an entanglement for them because until that particular thing or person they are waiting for arrives, they cannot pursue their normal life. This waiting, in turn, becomes a torturing experience for them. Thus, one can safely argue that these four distressed and unfortunate characters in the play are forced to keep waiting, since they are left with no other choice due to their wretched circumstances.

Waiting in view of the Door

Besides these four characters' wait there is a perpetual mental suffering for many others who wait for the door with a cloverleaf to be opened. The door is shut for a long period of time, as avers The Officer:

The Officer: And I have been looking two thousand five hundred and fifty-five times at that door without discovering where it leads. And that clover leaf which is to let in light – for whom is the light meant? Is there anybody within? Does anybody live there?

The Portress: I don't know. I have never seen it opened.

The Officer: It looks like a pantry door which I saw once when I was only four years old... (Strindberg and Bjorkman 37)

The closed door is one of the potent symbols of Absurdism incorporated by the playwright. It seems that some mystery lies with the door, something significant lies behind it. Everyone is anxious to see it opened and get the mystery unraveled. The Officer once makes people like The Chorus Singer wait and see what lies behind the door as it is to be opened, "The Officer: ...See here, don't go before the locksmith comes to open the door here. " The Chorus Singer in surprise asks was the door to be opened? (Strindberg and Bjorkman43) Thus, the people in the play are anxiously waiting to see the door open. Even, later in the Quarantine Station the Master of Quarantine asks The Officer, "Well, have you got that door opened yet?" (Strindberg and Bjorkman60) The Daughter believes that, "there is a suspicion that the solution of the world-riddle may be hidden behind [the door]" hence, she later tells The Portress to call the Lord Chancellor and all the Deans of Faculties, as she says the door is to be opened, though at that moment it is not opened. (Strindberg and Bjorkman92) Finally when the door gets opened as All Right-Minded announce, to surprise all, there lies nothing behind:

All Right Minded: Hooray! The door is open.

Lord Chancellor: What was behind the door?

The Glazier: I can see nothing.

Lord Chancellor: He cannot see anything – of course, he cannot!

Deans of the Faculties: what was behind that door?

Theology: Nothing! That is the solution of the world riddle. In the beginning God created heaven and the earth out of nothing –

Philosophy: Out of nothing comes nothing. (Strindberg and Bjorkman 96)

Therefore, the door represents nothingness and meaninglessness of the human existence. The mystery or the world riddle lying behind the door, as The Daughter says, turns out to be same nothingness like the Dean of Philosophy philosophizes. Thus, the perpetual waiting of all the characters, again, turns out to be a futile exercise as there waiting, ultimately, is a pursuit of nothingness. So, besides the specific waiting of the four discussed characters, the mysterious door also becomes a remarkable point making people wait to no avail. In this context of waiting, Ronald Hayman (1932-2019), British dramatist, biographer and critic, in his book titled *Samuel Beckett* (1980), tacitly points out that, "the act of waiting is itself a contradictory combination of doing nothing and doing something." (Hayman 4) "Something" again pertains to waiting, waiting for what? The answer is: waiting for nothing. This futile act of waiting in the context of the different characters in *A Dream Play* (1902) does not merely endorse their suffering

but, it is a tedious and tiresome process rendering whole of their lives miserable and pathetic.

Absurdism with reference to the growing Capitalism

A meticulous study of the Play also brings forth the idea of the playwright to depict the nuisances of Capitalist society. There is no denial of the fact that in a capitalist society the working class is driven into hellish circumstances. It is at the cost of the working class the capitalists generate their capital and grow richer their economy. At the very outset of the play the castle growing on dung symbolically pertains to the parasitic tendency of the capitalist society which grows by devaluing the working class society. (Kunchi 7868) Besides this symbol, at the later part of the play when the setting shifts to the Mediterranean the reader comes across two coal heavers who share their misery under a capitalist society. They are skilled workers, spending most of their time toiling for humanity but they are not paid sufficient enough even to earn bread and butter for themselves. They complain for they work tirelessly but do not get enough to eat. They are seen giving a brief commentary on the capitalist culture where the capitalists work the least but get enough and the working class earns meager amount after toiling hard. Even in terms of food they remain less privileged under such a system. They are not privileged enough to bathe on the workplaces even after working in a high temperature. They fear the police would not allow them. Nor can they get fruits to eat from the nearby tree. Strindberg gives a following picture in accordance to this terrible class division:

First Coal Heaver: This is hell!

Second Coal Heaver: One hundred and twenty degrees in the shadow.

First Heaver: Let's have a bath.

Second Heaver: The police won't let us. No bathing here.

First Heaver: Couldn't we pick some fruit off that tree?

Second Heaver: Then the police would get after us.

First Heaver: But I cannot do a thing in this heat – I'll just chuck the job –

Second Heaver: Then the police will get you for sure! –

[Pause] And you wouldn't have anything to eat anyhow.

First Heaver: Nothing to eat? We, who work hardest, get least food; and the rich, who do nothing, get most. Might one not – without disregard of truth – assert that this is injustice – (Strindberg and Bjorkman 78?)

The above given account by Strindberg bears the testimony of the fact that how wretched are the conditions for workers in the capitalist society of Strindberg's time and ever since. The capitalist class accumulates huge wealth and aggrandizes its own economy but at the same time the working class has to live in a hellish situation thereby amounting to an absurd and meaningless life.

Absurdism and Domestic Life

The Daughter soon after descending on earth enters into marriage with the poor Lawyer despite his opinion that it would not be a suitable match, but she wins his agreement. They got agreed that they would love each other which may bind them together and would also compromise for their dislikes and with everything which could injure their mutual conduct:

The Lawyer: Yes, what is most sweet, and what is also most bitter – love – wife and home – the highest and the lowest!

The Daughter: May I try it?

The Lawyer: With me?

The Daughter: With you- You know the rocks, the stumbling-stones. Let us avoid them.

The Lawyer: I am so poor.

The Daughter: What does that matter if we only love each other? And a little beauty costs nothing.

The Lawyer: I have dislikes which may prove your likes.

The Daughter: They can be adjusted. (Strindberg and Bjorkman51)

Just after tying a knot with The Lawyer, The Daughter's domestic miseries start and at personal level she starts experiencing the wretchedness of human life. Thus, the very first instance of the human misery the play represents is the familial/domestic life of The Daughter and The Lawyer. Their life becomes wretched and torturous and for them 'nothing' seems to improve denoting that their domestic life is a meaningless enterprise. The place The Daughter and The Lawyer live-in itself is a matter of chaos for the couple. Theirs is a small old and squalid house, terribly unpleasant and unsuitable. Their maid namely Christine is seen pasting paper strips constantly on the cracks of the walls to prevent the bitterly cold air, this pasting further generates a suffocating atmosphere. The poor lawyer seems satisfied with this pasting which he considers a cheap process owing to his meager means to afford any sophisticated heating system:

Christine: I paste, I paste.

The Daughter: [Pale and emaciated, sits by the stove]

You shut out all the air. I choke!

[...]

The Lawyer. That's right, Christine! Heat is expensive.

[...]

The Daughter: we shall have to get a larger place.

The Lawyer: We have no money for it. (Strindberg and Bjorkman52)

However, The Lawyer's poverty does not worry The Daughter much. The reproachable matter for her is the squalid house they live in. The suffocating environment in their house concerns her as she overtly avers that, "Poverty I was prepared for, but not for dirt." (Strindberg and Bjorkman53)

In the general scheme of domestic life, any newly married couple in the world wishes to have a child to fill their life with bliss. The child also becomes a potent cause to amplify the love between the couple and to strengthen its bond as also in this Play, The Daughter and The Lawyer agreed to get knotted despite much difference, for they thought that their children might play a role of a connecting link between them as The Daughter avers, "Then come the children and bring with them a diversion that remains for ever new." (Strindberg and Bjorkman51) But, later in their course of domestic life when they have a baby that too becomes a cause of suffering for them. Initially, the lawyer exhibits distress over the existence of their child as he believes that its "crying scares away [his] clients." (Strindberg and Bjorkman52) He realizes and avers that, "the child that was to become a link and a blessing – it becomes our ruin." (Strindberg and Bjorkman 53) Later in the play when The Lawyer reminds The Daughter of her domestic duties, especially her duty towards their child, who according to The Lawyer is crying for her The Daughter, expresses her resentment for her earth-bound existence. (Strindberg and Bjorkman 97)

In addition to the squalid place, the couple's suffering continues because of their remarkable difference in the choice of meals. Each one of them has his own keen sense of taste. Owing to the meager means of The Lawyer he could not afford fish as a meal, hence, he likes cabbage only to distaste his wife The Daughter who is fond of the fish:

The Lawyer: Cabbage is cheap, nourishing, and good to eat.

The Daughter: For those who like cabbage – to me it is repulsive...What are we to eat, then? Fish? But you hate fish? (Strindberg and Bjorkman53)

Therefore, given their mounting tension in the domestic sphere The Daughter becomes nervous and her view about marriage all together changes and she develops a deep resentment for it. After her experience she feels, "it is very difficult to be married – it is more difficult than anything else. One has to be an angel, I think!" (Strindberg and Bjorkman55)Therefore, Strindberg succeeds in expressing the modern atrophy with reference to the domestic life. It is the troubled married life of The Lawyer and The Daughter which makes the Play a semi-autobiographical given the fact that Strindberg's own married life had never been blissful. The dissolution of his three consecutive marriages had flooded his life with utmost trouble and misery. The Daughter's changed view about married life, more or less, seems Strindberg's own view.

Absurdism aligned with Pessimism

In order to get rid of the miseries and to try to improve the living conditions the characters fail drastically. There does not seem any kind of development in the characters' life standards. On the contrary those who strive to improve their conditions go from bad to worse. The Daughter has this empathetic urge for the humans that they should improve their lives and come out of their predicament. She enquires this fact from her husband, "why don't men do something to improve their lot?" The Lawyer replies with all the more pessimistic notion that even if some people always attempt to make progress they finish up either in prison or in the madhouse. (Strindberg and Bjorkman⁸⁰) Besides, within the course of the Play the reader does come across the characters like The Officer who want to progress, shun the miseries around and go for some development, but their strive goes futile. The Officer invites The Daughter and both leave for Fairhaven¹ to get some relief far from their anarchic circumstances around:

The Officer: Will you come with me now?

The Daughter: At once! But where?

The Officer: To Fairhaven. There it is summer; there the sun is shining and dancing, feasting and frolicking.

The Daughter: Then I will go there. (Strindberg and Bjorkman⁵⁷)

But, to reach the Fairhaven remains merely a dream for both The Officer and The Daughter. The Lawyer's condition gets more worsened when instead of Fairhaven they arrive in Foulstrand², the place full of miserably sick people being treated in the quarantine station in Foulstrand:

The Officer: [*Meets (The Master of Quarantine) and they shake hands*] Why, Ordstrom³. Have you landed here?

Master of Q: Yes, here I am.

The Officer: Is this Fairhaven?

Master of Q: No, that is on the other side. This is Foulstrand (Strindberg and Bjorkman 59)

The characters' strive for change and improvement in the play itself is shown hampered, thus engulfed by the streak of pessimism. The characters find themselves caught in a hopeless state as the wave of trifles and tribulations have surrounded them all around. This pessimistic rendering of lives, in turn, shake the roots of their existence and catapult them towards the meaningless situation.

¹ Fairhaven actually refers to some coastal places in Canada, Australia, UK, USA and Norway. In *A Dream Play* it symbolically represents a far-off blissful place, a summer resort.

² Foulstrand in *A Dream Play* is a foul place where sick people are treated (under the process of quarantine which is a sanitary measure to prevent the spread of a contagious plague by isolating the infected) in the quarantine station. It symbolizes a dystopian place full of miseries.

³ Ordstorm literally means "word spout" i.e. words spoken in an abrupt and louder tone while in a surprise.

In addition to *The Officer and The Daughter*, the reader also comes across two lovers namely He and She who too are caught in Foulstrand which they feel woeful, however, they cannot escape unless they spend forty days there. They feel miserable as their presumably pleasant rendezvous gets appallingly disturbed and they realize that the life's joys are too short-lived:

He: Woe to us! What have we done?

[...]

She: So short-lived are joy and happiness!

He: How long must we stay here?

Master of Q: Forty days and nights. (Strindberg and Bjorkman 65)

Thus, we get another image of despondent life whereby the two lovers are driven from Fairhaven to Foulstrand and consequently have to endure the trauma of the squalid life of Foulstrand for forty days.

The pessimistic overtones of the play also get manifested by the inherent contradiction among different entities which Strindberg successfully employs. This contradiction amounting to the meaninglessness is vividly commented on by *The Lawyer*:

I wake up in the morning with a headache; and then the repetitions begin, but so that everything becomes perverted. What the night before was pretty, agreeable, witty, is presented by memory in the morning as ugly, distasteful, stupid. Pleasure seems to decay, and all joy goes to pieces. What man calls success serves always as a basis for their next failure. (Strindberg and Bjorkman 75)

Besides, *The Lawyer's* view Strindberg uses other entities to develop the idea of contradiction. One such instance of contradiction is formulated in terms of the Sea portrayed in the play and the people who belong to the realms of the marine life. The sea is good when it provides livelihood to the poor fisherman who enjoys his occupation as clued in the play quite vaguely. When *The Fisherman*, as depicted, pulls, "the hook is torn out of a fish and brings up the heart with it through the neck –" i.e. the fish's heart comes out through its throat. (Strindberg and Bjorkman 73) Concomitantly, the sea is dreadful when it takes numerous lives after getting a ship sunken like what happens in the play to all the ships. The ships; *Friendship*, *Golden Peace*, *Hope*, especially the ship named *Justice* which *The Blind Man's* only son had also boarded all get sunken and destroyed. *The Blind Man* though being the most envied owing to his enormous wealth and property is woefully distressed as his only son departs from him by the sea. (Strindberg and Bjorkman 73) The sea, therefore, is also a source of despondence for many as it separates people for long. The sea is a cause of distress for sailors as they are always seen parting from their kith and kin. It is mentioned that the water of the

seas has turned salty after tears of the sailors have mixed with it. Thus, the sea becomes a source of agony for many who lose their kinsmen as tacitly represented by The Blind Man and his departing and presumably dying son. He philosophizes the idea of life in view of the sea as a source of kinsmen's parting from each other. He says that the life is an exercise of, "Meet and part. Part and meet." (Strindberg and Bjorkman 74) The reader comes to know about the sinking of the ship *Justice*, having been boarded by The Blind Man's son also, through the perspective of The Poet before The Daughter clues towards the sinking of the other ships. The Daughter says, "Nothing but the figure-heads remain of the sunken ships – and the names: *Justice, Friendship, Golden Peace, Hope...*The Poet: [*Searching in the pile*] Here is the name-board of the ship *Justice*. That was the one which left Fairhaven with The Blind Man's son on board." (Strindberg and Bjorkman 85) This appalling picture of destruction of the ships again pertains to, as points Ghassan Awad Ibrahim, "the absurdity of life" (The Significance 127) The Poet also gives the absurdist notion of human life in the poem he reads before The Daughter as, "Every moment of enjoyment/ Brings to someone else a sorrow." (Strindberg and Bjorkman 88)

Another instance of contradiction is depicted between the characters of Edith and Alice. Edith is distressed due to her plainness and unattractive countenance because of which she fails to arrest the attention of youth to dance with her. On the other hand Alice rejoices with all the privileges which Edith does not enjoy. Her feelings of despair increase when she sees Alice's happiness which ignites the emotion of bitterness inside her as she wishes that she could have the qualities of Alice. The reader can easily discern that life is full of contradictions, where some enjoy their bliss but simultaneously others experience their distress. Alice is seen rejoicing while Edith is weeping for her misery. Although the reader gets the notion of happiness related to some characters but, within the course of the Play one gets a pessimistic view of this happiness also, as it is considered deceitful. This is evident in the newly wedded family when they seem joyous, but, The Husband seems to have a keen insight about the transitory nature of happiness, as he remarks, "...at the heart of happiness grows the seed of disaster. Happiness devours itself like a flame..." (Strindberg and Bjorkman 72) The couple has realized that the happiness is inherently momentary and they firmly believe that behind every kind of joy their lies the seed of gloom and distress. Happiness, they believe consumes itself like fire. This temporary and fleeting nature of happiness intensely encapsulates the motif of pessimism in the Play. This hopeless human situation, in turn, does give the life an absurdist rendering and generate a feeling of nothingness or meaninglessness. The contradiction between different entities incorporated in the Play substantiates this argument further. For the people experiencing scourge, the life is altogether a meaningless phenomenon. On the other hand their happy counterparts experience a fleeting enterprise as whatever they enjoy is accounted by the writer as quite short-lived. Towards the end of the play, "the wall of the human faces, questioning, grieving, despairing", (Strindberg and Bjorkman 104) as

revealed by the light of the burning castle is tantamount to the miserable human situation. However, some critics remark that Strindberg builds an optimistic ending to this otherwise absurdist play. He draws the argument through the perspective of The Poet that it is the suffering which can work a source of salvation. This argument, at the end of the play becomes more vivid when The Daughter jumps into the fire, as it is the same, "fire through which The Daughter ascends back to heaven [which] is symbolically the same fire which burns the miseries [duties] of all the characters whom The Daughter has met." (Bhattacharyya 88) The reader can infer that Strindberg ends the Play with an optimistic note the idea which culminates when the bud on the roof opens into a gigantic chrysanthemum⁴ flower.

Conclusion

August Strindberg giving vent to his personal neurosis and conferring this play an autobiographical touch demarcates, quite vividly, the meaninglessness of human life. This master piece shook the modern theatre with what the critics termed as "theatrical monster" owing to its intricate pattern both in theme and structure. The Play provides an apt depiction of the chaotic and strife-ridden life of man. The struggle for change of some characters turning into futility renders the play to an utter pessimistic discourse. Therefore, the play, surcharged with the motif of suffering, depression, agony and vainness in terms of waiting, can be safely argued as an epitome of the Theatre of Absurd.

"Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" (Beckett, *Waiting* 56)

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⁴ A flower "named from the Greek prefix 'chrys-' meaning golden (its original colour) and '-anthemion,' meaning flower...a daisy-like with a typically yellow centre and a decorative pompom, chrysanthemums symbolize optimism and joy." (<https://www.telefora.com/meanng-of-flowers/chrysanthemum>)

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